



Marcionism

Marcionism was an early Christian dualistic belief system that originated with the teachings of Marcion of Sinope in Rome around 144 AD.^[1] Marcion was an early Christian theologian,^[2] evangelist,^[2] and an important figure in early Christianity.^{[2][3]} He was the son of a bishop of Sinope in Pontus. About the middle of the 2nd century (140–155) he traveled to Rome, where he joined the Syrian Gnostic Cerdo.^[4]

Marcion preached that the benevolent God of the Gospel who sent Jesus Christ into the world as the savior was the true Supreme Being, different and opposed to the malevolent Demiurge or creator god, identified with the Hebrew God of the Old Testament.^{[2][3][5]} He considered himself a follower of Paul the Apostle, whom he believed to have been the only true apostle of Jesus Christ.^{[2][3]}

Marcion's canon, possibly the first Christian canon ever compiled, consisted of eleven books: a gospel, which was a shorter version of the Gospel of Luke, and ten Pauline epistles.^{[2][3][6]} Marcion's canon rejected the entire Old Testament, along with all other epistles and gospels of what would become the 27-book New Testament canon, which during his life had yet to be compiled.^{[2][3][7][8]} Pauline epistles enjoy a prominent position in the Marcionite canon, since Paul was considered by Marcion to be Christ's only true apostle.^{[2][3][8]}

Marcionism was denounced by its opponents as heresy and written against by the early Church Fathers – notably by Tertullian in his five-book treatise *Adversus Marcionem* (*Against Marcion*), in about 208.^{[2][3]} Marcion's writings are lost, though they were widely read and numerous manuscripts must have existed.^{[2][3]} Even so, many scholars claim it is possible to reconstruct and deduce a large part of ancient Marcionism through what later critics, especially Tertullian, said concerning Marcion.^{[2][3][9]}

History

According to Tertullian and other writers of early proto-orthodox Christianity, the movement known as Marcionism began with the teachings and excommunication of Marcion around 144. Marcion was reportedly a wealthy shipowner, the son of a bishop of Sinope of Pontus, Asia Minor. He arrived in Rome c. 140, soon after Bar Kokhba's revolt. The organization continued in the East for some centuries later, particularly outside the Byzantine Empire in areas which later would be dominated by Manichaeism.

Schism within Marcionism

By the reign of emperor Commodus (180–192), Marcionism was divided into various opinions with various leaders; among whom was Apelles, whom Rhodo describes as: "... priding himself on his manner of life and his age, acknowledges one principle, but says that the prophecies are from an opposing principle, being led to this view by the responses of a maiden by name Philumene, who was possessed by a demon". However, "others, among whom were Potitus and Basilicus, held to two principles, as did Marcion himself. Others consider that there are not only two, but three natures. Of these, Syneros was the leader and chief."^[10]

In early 3rd century, a splinter group of Marcionites was established by Prepon the Assyrian, who claimed the existence of an intermediate spiritual entity between the good and evil gods.^[11]

Teachings

The premise of Marcionism is that many of the teachings of Christ are incompatible with the actions of the God of the Old Testament. Focusing on the Pauline traditions of the Gospel, Marcion felt that all other conceptions of the Gospel, and especially any association with the Old Testament religion, was opposed to, and a backsliding from, the truth. He further regarded the arguments of Paul regarding law and gospel, wrath and grace, works and faith, flesh and spirit, sin and righteousness, death and life, as the essence of religious truth. He ascribed these aspects and characteristics as two principles, the righteous and wrathful God of the Old Testament, who is at the same time identical with the creator of the world, and a second God of the Gospel who is only love and mercy.^[12]

Marcionites held that the God of the Hebrew Bible was inconsistent, jealous, wrathful and genocidal, and that the material world he created was defective, a place of suffering; the God who made such a world is a bungling or malicious demiurge.

In the God of the [Old Testament] he saw a being whose character was stern justice, and therefore anger, contentiousness and unmercifulness. The law which rules nature and man appeared to him to accord with the characteristics of this God and the kind of law revealed by him, and this God is the creator and lord of the world (κοσμοκράτωρ [English transliteration: kosmokrator/cosmocrator]). As the law which governs the world is inflexible and yet, on the other hand, full of contradictions, just and again brutal, and as the law of the Old Testament exhibits the same features, so the God of creation was to Marcion a being who united in himself the whole gradations of attributes from justice to malevolence, from obstinacy to inconsistency."^[13]

In Marcionite belief, Jesus was not a Jewish Messiah, but a spiritual entity that was sent by the Monad to reveal the truth about existence, thus allowing humanity to escape the earthly trap of the demiurge. Marcion called God 'the Stranger God', or 'the Alien God' in some translations, as this deity had not had any previous interactions with the world, and was wholly unknown. See also the Unknown God of Hellenism and the Areopagus sermon.

Various popular sources count Marcion among the Gnostics, but as the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed.) puts it, "it is clear that he would have had little sympathy with their mythological speculations" (p. 1034). In 1911 Henry Wace stated:

A modern divine would turn away from the dreams of Valentinianism in silent contempt; but he could not refuse to discuss the question raised by Marcion, whether there is such opposition between different parts of what he regards as the word of God, that all cannot come from the same author.

A primary difference between Marcionites and Gnostics was that the Gnostics based their theology on secret wisdom (as, for example, Valentinius who claimed to receive the secret wisdom from Theudas who received it direct from Paul) of which they claimed to be in possession, whereas Marcion based his theology

on the contents of the Letters of Paul and the recorded sayings of Jesus — in other words, an argument from scripture, with Marcion defining what was and was not scripture. Also, the Christology of the Marcionites is thought to have been primarily Docetic, denying the human nature of Jesus. This may have been due to the unwillingness of Marcionites to believe that Jesus was the son of both God the Father and the demiurge. Scholars of Early Christianity disagree on whether to classify Marcion as a Gnostic: Adolf von Harnack does not classify Marcion as a Gnostic,^[14] whereas G. R. S. Mead does.^[15] Harnack argued that Marcion was not a Gnostic in the strict sense because Marcion rejected elaborate creation myths, and did not claim to have special revelation or secret knowledge. Mead claimed Marcionism makes certain points of contact with Gnosticism in its view that the creator of the material world is not the true deity, rejection of materialism and affirmation of a transcendent, purely good spiritual realm in opposition to the evil physical realm, the belief Jesus was sent by the "True" God to save humanity, the central role of Jesus in revealing the requirements of salvation, the belief Paul had a special place in the transmission of this "wisdom", and its docetism. According to the 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica article on Marcion:^[16]

It was no mere school for the learned, disclosed no mysteries for the privileged, but sought to lay the foundation of the Christian community on the pure gospel, the authentic institutes of Christ. The pure gospel, however, Marcion found to be everywhere more or less corrupted and mutilated in the Christian circles of his time. His undertaking thus resolved itself into a reformation of Christendom. This reformation was to deliver Christendom from false Jewish doctrines by restoring the Pauline conception of the gospel, Paul being, according to Marcion, the only apostle who had rightly understood the new message of salvation as delivered by Christ. In Marcion's own view, therefore, the founding of his church—to which he was first driven by opposition—amounts to a reformation of Christendom through a return to the gospel of Christ and to Paul; nothing was to be accepted beyond that. This of itself shows that it is a mistake to reckon Marcion among the Gnostics. A dualist he certainly was, but he was not a Gnostic.

Marcionism shows the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on Christianity, and presents a moral critique of the Old Testament from the standpoint of Platonism. According to Harnack, the sect may have led other Christians to introduce a formal statement of beliefs into their liturgy (see Creed) and to formulate a canon of authoritative Scripture of their own, thus eventually producing the current canon of the New Testament.

As for the main question, however, whether he knew of, or assumes the existence of, a written New Testament of the Church in any sense whatever, in this case an affirmatory answer is most improbable, because if this were so he would have been compelled to make a direct attack upon the New Testament of the Church, and if such an attack had been made we should have heard of it from Tertullian. Marcion, on the contrary, treats the Catholic Church as one that 'follows the Testament of the Creator-God,' and directs the full force of his attack against this Testament and against the falsification of the Gospel and of the Pauline Epistles. His polemic would necessarily have been much less simple if he had been opposed to a Church which, by possessing a New Testament side by side with the Old Testament, had *ipso facto* placed the latter under the shelter of the former. In fact Marcion's position towards the Catholic Church is intelligible, in the full force of its simplicity, only under the supposition that the Church had not yet in her hand any 'litera scripta Novi Testamenti.'^[17]

Marcion is believed to have imposed a severe morality on his followers, some of whom suffered in the persecutions. In particular, he refused to re-admit those who recanted their faith under Roman persecution; see also [Lapsi \(Christian\)](#).

Marcionite canon

[Tertullian](#) claimed Marcion was the first to separate the *New Testament* from the *Old Testament*.^[18] Marcion is said to have gathered [scriptures](#) from Jewish tradition, and juxtaposed these against the sayings and teachings of Jesus in a work entitled the *Antithesis*.^[19] Besides the *Antithesis*, the Testament of the Marcionites was also composed of a *Gospel of Christ* which was [Marcion's version](#) of Luke, and that the Marcionites attributed to Paul, that was different in a number of ways from the version that is now regarded as canonical.^[20] It seems to have lacked all prophecies of Christ's coming, as well as the Infancy account, the baptism, and the verses were more terse in general. It also included ten of the [Pauline epistles](#), in the following order: [Galatians](#), [1 Corinthians](#), [2 Corinthians](#), [Romans](#), [1 Thessalonians](#), [2 Thessalonians](#), [Laodiceans](#), [Colossians](#), [Philemon](#), [Philippians](#).^[21]



Marcion teaching. Mart Sander (mixed media, 2014)

Marcion's [Apostolikon](#) did not include the [Pastoral epistles](#) or the [Epistle to the Hebrews](#). According to the [Muratorian canon](#), it included a Marcionite pseudo-Paul's [epistle to the Alexandrians](#) and an [epistle to the Laodiceans](#).^[22] The contents of this Marcionite Epistle to the Laodiceans are unknown. Some scholars equate it with the Epistle to the Ephesians, because the latter originally did not contain the words 'in Ephesus', and because it is the only non-pastoral Pauline epistle missing from the Marcionite canon, suggesting Laodiceans was simply Ephesians under another name.^[23] The Epistle to the Alexandrians is not known from any other source; Marcion himself appears to have never mentioned it.



Marcion of Sinope

In bringing together these texts, Marcion redacted what is perhaps the first [New Testament canon](#) on record, which he called the Gospel and the [Apostolikon](#), which reflects his belief in the writings of Jesus and the apostle Paul respectively. An English language reconstruction of the content of the Evangelion and [Apostolikon](#) attested in Patristic sources was published by [Jason David BeDuhn](#) in 2013.^[24]

The Prologues to the Pauline Epistles (which are not a part of the text, but short introductory sentences as one might find in modern study Bibles^[25]), found in several older Latin [codices](#), are now widely believed to have been written by Marcion or one of his followers. [Harnack](#) makes the following claim:^[26]

We have indeed long known that Marcionite readings found their way into the ecclesiastical text of the Pauline Epistles, but now for seven years we have known that Churches actually accepted the Marcionite prefaces to the Pauline Epistles! De Bruyne has made one of the finest discoveries

of later days in proving that those prefaces, which we read first in Codex Fuldensis and then in numbers of later manuscripts, are Marcionite, and that the Churches had not noticed the cloven hoof.

Conversely, several early Latin codices contain Anti-Marcionite Prologues to the Gospels.

Comparison

Marcionite canon (c. 130–140)		Modern canon (c. 4th century)	
Section	Books	Section	Books
Evangelikon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Gospel of Marcion</u> <i>(close resemblance to Gospel of Luke)</i> 	<u>Gospels</u> <i>(Euangelia)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Gospel of Matthew</u> ▪ <u>Gospel of Mark</u> ▪ <u>Gospel of Luke</u> ▪ <u>Gospel of John</u>
<i>(nonexistent)</i>	<i>(none)</i>	<u>Acts</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Acts of the Apostles</u>
Apostolikon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Galatians</u> ▪ <u>1 Corinthians</u> ▪ <u>2 Corinthians</u> ▪ <u>Romans</u> ▪ <u>1 Thessalonians</u> ▪ <u>2 Thessalonians</u> ▪ <u>Laodiceans</u>¹ ▪ <u>Colossians</u> ▪ <u>Philippians</u> ▪ <u>Philemon</u> 	<u>Pauline epistles</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Romans</u> ▪ <u>1 Corinthians</u> ▪ <u>2 Corinthians</u> ▪ <u>Galatians</u> ▪ <u>Ephesians</u> ▪ <u>Philippians</u> ▪ <u>Colossians</u> ▪ <u>1 Thessalonians</u> ▪ <u>2 Thessalonians</u> ▪ <u>1 Timothy</u> ▪ <u>2 Timothy</u> ▪ <u>Titus</u> ▪ <u>Philemon</u> ▪ <u>Hebrews</u>
<i>(nonexistent)</i>	<i>(none)</i>	<u>Catholic epistles</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>James</u> ▪ <u>1 Peter</u> ▪ <u>2 Peter</u> ▪ <u>1 John</u> ▪ <u>2 John</u> ▪ <u>3 John</u> ▪ <u>Jude</u>
<i>(nonexistent)</i>	<i>(none)</i>	<u>Apocalypses</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Apocalypse of John</u>

1. Contents unknown; some scholars equate it with Ephesians.

Reaction to Marcion by early Christians

According to a remark by Origen (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 15.3), Marcion "prohibited allegorical interpretations of the scripture". Tertullian disputed this in his treatise against Marcion.

Tertullian, along with Epiphanius of Salamis, also charged that Marcion set aside the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, and used Luke alone. Tertullian cited Luke 6:43–45 ("a good tree does not produce bad fruit")^[27] and Luke 5:36–38 ("nobody tears a piece from a new garment to patch an old garment or puts new wine in old wineskins"),^[28] in theorizing that Marcion set about to recover the authentic teachings of Jesus. Irenaeus claimed,

[Marcion's] salvation will be the attainment only of those souls which had learned his doctrine; while the body, as having been taken from the earth, is incapable of sharing in salvation.^[29]

Tertullian also attacked this view in *De Carne Christi*.

Polycarp, according to Irenaeus in his work, *Adversus Haereses*, had an encounter with Marcion:

And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and said, "Dost thou know me?" "I do know thee, the first-born of Satan."

Hippolytus reported that Marcion's phantasmal (and Docetist) Christ was "revealed as a man, though not a man", and did not really die on the cross.^[30] However, Ernest Evans, in editing this work, observes:

This may not have been Marcion's own belief. It was certainly that of Hermogenes (cf. Tertullian, *Adversus Hermogenem*) and probably other gnostics and Marcionites, who held that the intractability of this matter explains the world's many imperfections.

Islamic accounts

The Arabic name for Marcionism, *marqiyūniyya*, is attested to by several historical sources of the Islamic Golden Age which appear to reveal that a meager Marcionite community continued to exist in the Near East into the tenth century. For example, the Christian writer Thomas of Margā states that, at the end of the eighth century, the metropolitan of Gēlān and Daylam, Shuwḥālīshōʿ, travelled into the remote parts of his see, preaching "among the pagans, Marcionites and Manichaeans."^[31] In a similar way, the tenth-century Muslim bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm goes so far as to claim that the Marcionites are "numerous in Khurāsān" and that there "they practice openly, like the Manichaeans."^[32] Although information about the Khorasanite Marcionites is not related in any other historical source, Ibn al-Nadīm nevertheless also quotes a "reliable informant" (*thiqa*), "whom he says had seen Marcionite books and who reported that their script resembled that of the Manichaeans."^{[33][34]}

Those medieval Muslim writers who specialized in the study of foreign religions often presented Marcionite theology accurately. For example, al-Masʿūdī (d. 956) states that the Marcionites taught "two principles, good and evil, and justice is a third (principle) between the two,"^[35] which, according to de Blois, are clear references to the Marcionite belief in "the good god, evil matter, and the just god."^[34] In the majority of cases, the Islamic references to Marcionism are really references to what has been termed "Neo-Marcionism," a sub-branch of the sect that seems to have lived in Khorasan in the tenth century.^[34] The classical Muslim thinkers rejected all types of Marcionite theology as deviations from the truth, and some

thinkers, such as Ibn al-Malāḥimī (d. c. 1050) wrote polemics against them as others did against Nicene Christianity.^[34] This did not, however, prevent many of the same thinkers from studying the Marcionites from an anthropological or sociological point of view, as is evident from Ibn al-Malāḥimī's extended reference to the customs of the Marcionites.^[34]

Further scholarship

In *Lost Christianities*, Bart Ehrman contrasts the Marcionites with the Ebionites as polar ends of a spectrum with regard to the Old Testament.^[36] Ehrman acknowledges that many of Marcion's ideas are very close to what is currently known as "Gnosticism", especially his rejection of the Jewish God, his rejection of the Old Testament, and his rejection of the material world, and his elevation of Paul as the primary apostle. There were early Christian groups, such as the Ebionites, which did not accept Paul's writings as a part of their canon. Ehrman asserts that Marcion likely "hated Jews and everything Jewish".^[37]

Robert M. Price considers the Pauline canon a single collection of epistles despite the problem which is caused by a lack of knowledge as to how they were collected, when they were collected, who collected them and sent copies of them to the various churches.^[38] Price has investigated several historical scenarios and reached the conclusion that Marcion was the first person in recorded history who is known to have collected Paul's writings and sent copies of them to various churches together as a canon. He summarizes,

But the first collector of the Pauline Epistles had been Marcion. No one else we know of would be a good candidate, certainly not the essentially fictive Luke, Timothy, and Onesimus. And Marcion, as Burkitt and Bauer show, fills the bill perfectly.^[39]

David Trobisch argues that the evidence which is revealed by comparison of the oldest manuscripts of Paul's letters proves that several epistles had previously been assembled as an anthology which was published separate from the New Testament, and as a whole, this anthology was then incorporated into the New Testament. Trobisch also argues that Paul was the assembler of his own letters for publication.^[40]

See also

- Antinomianism
- Antitactae
- Borborites
- Catharism
- Christianity in the ante-Nicene period
- Gnosticism
- List of Gnostic sects
- Manichaeism
- Positive Christianity
- Marcion hypothesis

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